

# **Sufism and the Formative Period of German Orientalism: The Case of Oriental Manuscripts Preserved at the Gotha Research Library**

SAEED ZARRABI-ZADEH

Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Erfurt, Germany

The era stretching from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century is a significant period in the history of German orientalism. Prior to that time, the study of oriental languages was long perceived as being supplementary to theology. Semitic languages including Hebrew, the *sacra philologia*, and its alleged dialect, Arabic, were principally employed as tools for understanding the Bible (Fück 1955; Heine 1974). The last decades of the eighteenth century, however, witnessed the first serious attempts to perceive the “Orient” in itself and to establish dialogue with its culture in German speaking regions. Forerunners of German orientalism such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (d. 1832), Joseph Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall (d. 1856) and Friedrich Rückert (d. 1866) endeavored to acquire deeper knowledge of oriental cultures, translated oriental texts, and produced works inspired by the East. Due to the industrious efforts of these and other early orientalists, the field of *Orientalistik* gained considerable independence from theology,<sup>1</sup> and it evolved from being merely an auxiliary science (*Hilfswissenschaft*) in the service of biblical studies to a distinct academic discipline (Flügel 1834: 198). New chairs of Oriental Languages were established in various universities (for a detailed list, see Wokoeck 2009: 235–87), and the first scholarly organization dedicated to the study of the East, the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*, was founded in 1845.

This era was not merely the developmental period of German orientalism but it was also the formative period in the construction of the modern concept of the “Orient” in German consciousness. Although the geo-cultural concept of the East has changed over the course of time (Kontje 2004: 12), the notion of the Orient that took shape in this period has continued to influence modern perceptions of the term. The works produced by the pioneers of

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<sup>1</sup> The independence of orientalism from theology in the German context is still a disputable issue. Some scholars (e.g., Marchand 2009: xxviii–xxix) believe that secular scholarship did not entirely displace theological studies in the oriental studies of the late eighteenth century and German orientalism was not a fully secular science during the nineteenth century.

orientalism were frequently referenced by later German scholars and thinkers, and several such works, be it their own Orient-inspired writings or translations of oriental texts, achieved great popularity among the German public. In a broader context, the notion of the Orient formed by early German orientalists strongly influenced the Western understanding of the East in modern times. Although the Germans had not yet engaged in any colonialist ventures, and thus had no direct political or financial interests in the East prior to the late nineteenth century, they remained free to concentrate on conceptualizing the Orient and enhancing their *Wissenschaftlichkeit* in the absence of such entanglement (Marchand 2009: 103–4). They became, therefore, unquestioned international pacesetters in the field of oriental studies, though being later excluded from consideration in the study of Western orientalism by some scholars such as Edward Said (1978: 17–19).<sup>2</sup>

Among the various regions of the Orient, South Asia was the first to attract the attention of early German orientalists, and the study of Indian culture and languages, especially Sanskrit, has remained a part of oriental studies in German-speaking areas (McGetchin 2009; Kontje 2004: 63–4). It was Middle Eastern studies, however, that gained remarkable importance in German *Orientalistik* during its formative period, partly because of the Germans' centuries-old proximity to the Ottoman Empire and their relative distance from South Asia. Within different aspects of the Middle East, where the predominant religious tradition is Islam, mystical Islam or Sufism captured the interest of several forerunners of orientalism, who were heavily influenced by the romantic enthusiasm of their age (Schwab 1984; Roche-Mahdi 1997). Romanticism emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental, all features which could easily be found in Sufism, especially in its pre-modern classical form. Hammer-Purgstall, one of the most significant orientalists of the early nineteenth century, was an admirer of the medieval Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) and was the first to present his poetry to the German public (Schimmel 1993: 388–9; Hammer-Purgstall 1818: 163–198); Rückert published his *Ghaselen* based upon the content and form of Rumi's lyrics (Lewis 2008: 566–

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<sup>2</sup> Said's exclusion of German scholars from the discourse on orientalism seems plausible so far as their non-colonial motivation in the early period of orientalism is concerned. The emergence of the (sub-)discipline of Islamic Studies in German academia during the time of the Germans' adoption of colonial and imperialist policies (1884–1914) and the engagement of several orientalist institutions and individuals in the course of carrying out that policy yet show the connection of colonial aspirations and scholarly pursuits in the German context.

7); and, Goethe's imagination was captivated by the Persian poet Hafiz (d. 1389/90), whose poetry involves major Sufi themes and served as the inspiration for *West-östlicher Divan*.<sup>3</sup>

During the decisive epoch when German orientalism was taking shape, libraries and private collections played a pivotal role in providing orientalists with the texts they required. While British, French and Dutch colonial powers stationed soldiers, bureaucrats and judges in the East thus allowing their orientalists ample access to oriental materials, Germans had very limited access to the *Orientalia* of that time on account of lacking due physical presence there. The primary exceptions were the diplomats sent to the East, like the Prussian ambassador Heinrich Friedrich von Diez (d. 1817) and the Viennese diplomat Hammer-Purgstall, both of whom had the opportunity to amass private collections of oriental literature, or those sponsored by rulers or nobility to travel and gather oriental materials, like the explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (d. 1811). In a time when voyaging to the Orient was barely affordable and logistically demanding, and when universities were still poorly equipped in the way of oriental resources, it was libraries and collections that in many cases became the sole sources Germans had for gaining knowledge about the Orient (Mangold 2004: 71–2). Among the oriental collections available in the first half of the nineteenth century, the one gathered by the abovementioned Seetzen and preserved in the Ducal Library of Gotha was a major source of oriental manuscripts in the Germanic world besides the other two located in Vienna and Berlin (Flügel 1834: 226). Compared to the modest number of manuscripts existing in private collections, such an enormous archive consisting of more than 3,000 manuscripts in the middle of the German-speaking world, and so close to such centers of orientalism and romanticism as Weimar and Jena, caught the attention of many of the pioneers of orientalism. To mention but a few, Goethe frequently made use of these manuscripts thanks to his friendship with the duke of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, Ernst II (d. 1804), Hammer-Purgstall had personal contact with Seetzen and explained and published some of the manuscripts; and Rückert repeatedly consulted this collection (Krischke 2011; Stein [Hans] 1997: 26; Bobzin 1995).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* also involves passages inspired by Rumi. In addition to containing translations of some of his verses, a poem in the *Divan* entitled *Selige Sehnsucht* attests to the reflection of Rumi's thought and the Sufi notions of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*). For a discussion on this issue, see Zarrinkub 1985: 898.

<sup>4</sup> The fame of the oriental manuscripts in Gotha was increased even further by several other factors, for instance the publication of its manuscripts by non-German (besides the German) scholars. See Stein [Peter] 1997 for examples of such publications.

Being a crucial source of *Orientalia*, manuscripts preserved in the Ducal Library of Gotha were significant in the construction of the concept of the Orient for early German orientalists. Seetzen, the man who gathered the collection, apparently had no discernable plan or specific criteria for choosing which materials to purchase during his excursions to the Middle East, and such a non-selective approach was accepted by those who made use of this varied assortment of manuscripts, including the catalogist Wilhelm Pertsch (d. 1899). The ramifications of this strategy for orientalists was that, instead of focusing on merely one or some particular aspects of the Orient, the Gotha collection was a cross-section of the East that represented a comprehensive image of oriental culture on the whole but at the micro level. According to Pertsch, this characteristic was a considerable advantage afforded by the Gotha manuscripts, which was supposed to “equally” represent all branches of Islamic sciences, a benefit other more selective collections lacked (Pertsch 1878: x). The content of the manuscripts, which were purported to represent the East in its various aspects, was thus significant in shaping the image of a multifaceted “Orient.” Interestingly, the major languages of Gotha’s collection—namely Arabic, Persian and Turkish with Sanskrit being among the important languages aside from this triad—became the canonic languages for the discourse of German *Orientalistik* later in the nineteenth century (Mangold 2004: 55–7).

The dominant theme of the oriental collection at Gotha encompasses the humanities in general, including such fields as theology, Quranic studies, narrative prose, poetry, law and history, although Seetzen, himself a natural scientist, also purchased oriental texts in other fields such as medicine, geography, astronomy, and natural history. All of these categories are presented in the most exhaustive catalog of the collection available, namely the annotated eight-volume work produced by Pertsch between 1859 and 1893, which played a major role in introducing the content of the manuscripts. However beneficial and explanatory this catalog may be, with regard to the “mystical” content of the manuscripts it provides an imprecise and misleading picture of the status of mystical texts within the collection. Pertsch sometimes itemizes manuscripts according to their content (such as theology, jurisprudence and philosophy) while at other times he does so based on their form (like poetry, prose and narratives), a methodology that results in several overlapping categories. He regards *Mystik* as an independent category in Arabic catalogs but as a sub-category of theology in Persian ones, with no mention of the subject in the Turkish catalog classification, thereby creating the impression that there are only a limited number of mystical works within the collection and that these can only be found among the Arabic and Persian texts. Nevertheless, a closer look

at the manuscripts shows that numerous Sufi texts have been classified under categories other than *Mystik*, for example under the divisions of theology, biography and poetry. Additionally, the relatively extensive category of “manuscripts with mixed content” (*Handschriften vermischten Inhalts*) at the beginning of each Arabic, Persian and Turkish catalog incorporates several items associated with Sufism. Aside from this imprecision of Pertsch’s choices in categorization, his understanding of the notion of mysticism followed the general discourse of his time, when the academic understanding of mysticism was still in its infancy (McGinn 1991: 267 and 421). Although he wisely distinguished between the categories of mysticism, magic and occult sciences, there was still much confusion between these divisions during the nineteenth century which also affected his own cataloging.<sup>5</sup>

Almost one and a half centuries after Pertsch published the first volume of his register, we are now in a proper position, with the aid of the rich scholarship on and a more exact understanding of mysticism,<sup>6</sup> to reconsider Pertsch’s categorizations of the mystical texts in Gotha’s oriental collection. Recognizing the strong presence of Sufism in these oriental sources, which results from such reconsideration, can demonstrate how this highly significant assortment of manuscripts provided an image of the Orient characterized by an intensely mystical flavor to early German orientalists, whose perceptions of the East were derived mainly by peering through the lens of such priceless collections.

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<sup>5</sup> Such confusion existed at least until the early twentieth century. See the chapter “Mysticism and Magic” in Evelyn Underhill’s classic work, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911).

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis and evaluation of the major scholarly definitions of mysticism since the second half of the nineteenth century, see Zarrabi-Zadeh 2008.

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